

Moses - Finding God in the Ordinary (Exodus 3:1-15)

For the next eight weeks or so things are going to be a little different... we are going to shift our reflections during worship to the Old Testament reading as we journey through the story of Moses and the people of Israel.

Alternating preaching on the Gospel and the Old Testament readings has a long history in the Anglican Church as we recognise the importance of the whole of scripture for our understanding of who God is and who we are to be as the people of God.

The story of Moses is a particularly important one for us to reflect on since this is the year we hear from Matthew's gospel and one of the key ways in which Matthew understands Jesus is as the new Moses, the deliverer and instructor of God's people. Understanding Moses' story may help us to understand the story of Jesus and our own story in a new light.

The story of Moses unfolds during the Egyptian genocide. In Exodus 1:22 we hear that Pharaoh had commanded all his people, *"Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."* Generations of slave labour, economic exploitation and ruthless oppression, were culminating in unthinkable tragedy and violence.

Through the courage of his mother and the compassion of an Egyptian princess, the baby Moses survives and is adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, taken into the Egyptian court and given an Egyptian name. Moses grows up as a child of two worlds, both Egyptian and Hebrew, both dominating and dominated. As a young man, Moses struggles with his ambiguous identity and in a moment of rage, kills an Egyptian overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave, thus becoming a fugitive from Egyptian justice.

When we meet Moses today, he is living in the Land of Midian, doing his best to lose his Egyptian accent, and find his place among a new people and a new land. He has married into one of the local families and is working as a shepherd for his new father-in-law.

On an ordinary day Moses is moving the flock as he would have done regularly - a perfectly ordinary Midianite shepherd, fulfilling his perfectly ordinary role on a perfectly regular day. **But God was present in the midst of the ordinary, and discovering this would change Moses' life forever.**

Exodus 3 tells us that Moses *"led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."*

Do you ever wonder how long it took Moses to discover something divine in the midst of his daily routine?

We tend to think of the 'burning bush' as a miraculous event, but it is centred on what would have been a fairly ordinary experience for Moses. For Moses bushes were an everyday part of the background as he herded Jethro's sheep. In a hot dry climate with cold dark nights, bushes provided fuel for fires. So, Moses would have seen his share of burning bushes - those he set alight and those he stumbled across - remnants of campfires and the occasional scrub fire burning in the distance.

So how long, I wonder, did it take Moses to realise that this burning bush was different?

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner says that the burning bush was not a miracle, but a test. He writes, *“God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could pay attention to something for more than a few minutes. When Moses did, God spoke. The trick is to pay attention to what is going on around you long enough to behold the miracle without falling asleep. There is another world, right here within this one, whenever we pay attention.”*

Moses could have ignored the burning bush, he could have caught a glimpse of it and thought “Oh, how pretty,” and kept right on driving the sheep. Moses could have decided that he would come back tomorrow to see if the bush was still burning, when he had a little more time, only then he would not have been Moses. He would just have been a guy who got away with murder, without ever discovering what else his life might have been about.

What made him Moses – one of the great heroes of our faith - was his ability to pay attention to what was going on around him long enough to behold the miracle.

When the Lord saw that Moses was paying attention, God called to him out of the bush, *“Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”*

When Moses took off his shoes the ground did not suddenly become holy. Moses took off his shoes and discovered that the ground had been holy the entire time.

The month of September finds us right in the middle of the Liturgical season called ordinary time – the period between Pentecost and Advent. But for many of us, ‘ordinary time’ is not just the name of a season, it feels like the definition of our lives – our days are full of comfortable, regular routines, we wouldn’t consider ourselves to be extraordinary people and our lives aren’t full of miraculous occurrences or extraordinary events.

The story of Moses and his encounter with God in the burning bush has much to say to us about our ordinary lives and the way in which we view and value the everyday ordinary occurrences that they are made up of.

The story of Moses’ call from an ordinary bush reveals to us a God, who calls out to us from within the world, from the very midst of our everyday lives. It reminds us that we encounter God through that which is common and ordinary.

As Barbara Brown Taylor argues, the promise woven through the stories of scripture is that God is not confined to holy places nor are encounters with God only for ‘holy people’.

“People encounter God under shady oak trees, on riverbanks, at the tops of mountains, and in long stretches of barren wilderness. God shows up in whirlwinds, starry skies, burning bushes, and perfect strangers. When people want to know more about God, the son of God tells them to pay attention to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, to women kneading bread and workers lining up for their pay. Whoever wrote this stuff believed that people could learn as much about the ways of God from paying attention to the world as they could from paying attention to scripture.”

This is a wonderful promise for those of us who feel fairly ordinary – but do we really believe it – and do we live as though we believe it?

We have a tendency as humans to separate things into mutually exclusive categories, separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world. Without really thinking about it, we expect God to work within our categories – we expect to ‘find’ God in church but not in the supermarket, we look for wisdom in holy books but don’t pause to read God’s creation, we go to Christian conferences to hear ‘great teachers’ but we fail to recognise the lessons we are being taught by our children or by our difficult neighbours.

Our lives and the moments that make them up are the stuff of miracles, our invitations to participate in Divine life. As Poet Elizabeth Barret Browning writes:

*Earth is crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God
But only the one who sees
takes off their shoes.*

There is another world, right here within this one, whenever we pay attention, and God is waiting, has always been waiting, for our wonder and awe to make us stop and see reality for what it really is.

What made him Moses was his ability to pay attention to what was going on around him long enough to behold the miracle – Can we learn to do the same?